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SUBJECT: Elections, Activists and Faith in Dashoguz

Summary

11. (SBU) During a recent pre-election trip to Dashoguz Welayat (Province), local election officials were friendly but constrained, given the (unexpected) presence of Central Election Commission Chairman, Myrat Garryev. They maintained to the A/DCM that Turkmenistan's February 11 presidential election represented a major step forward, with the most concerted push ever to educate voters on candidates, platforms, voters' rights and issues. Questions asked during candidates' meetings with "voters" were not planted; Garryev noted that the broad range of issues under discussion was convincing voters that local candidates, no matter how well they understood local concerns, might not be the best choice for president. A/DCM's interlocutors also clarified that platform discussion of "land ownership" was not an indication that land would be privatized. In a short side meeting with the Principle Deputy Governor, A/DCM also called for an open and fair judicial process for environmental activist Andrey Zatoka (who a few days later was given a 3-year suspended sentence); she also visited Turkmenistan's most holy pilgrimage site with a visibly moved Garryev, who double-hats as Deputy Chairman of the Council of Religious Affairs. End Summary.

12. (SBU) During a January 26 trip to Dashoguz Welayat (Province) to discuss preparations for the February 11 presidential election, A/DCM found her trip largely hijacked by the Chairman of the Central Election Commission, Myrat Garryev, who had flown up from Ashgabat the previous night to attend (and dominate) the A/DCM's meeting with the chairman of the provincial election commission, First Deputy Governor Charyguly Shadurdyev. Afterwards, Garryev and Shadurdyev accompanied A/DCM to visit a district polling and election education station, then Garryev, who also double-hats as Deputy Chairman of Turkmenistan's Council of Religious Affairs, insisted on taking A/DCM to visit the nearby Najm-ed-din Kubra Mausoleum, one of Turkmenistan's most holy pilgrimage sites.

Plenty of Bread in Dashoguz

13. (U) Prior to meeting with Shadurdyev, the A/DCM and Pol/Econ assistant walked through the Dashoguz market, Turkmenistan's second-largest, to survey availability of bread and flour. Flat

bread was plentiful, but the commercial price for a loaf had almost doubled since the summer. Even at an early hour, bread vendors were doing a brisk business. There was no local flour available, but A/DCM saw bags of imported flour from Kazakhstan for sale.

A Surprise Meeting with an Old Friend

¶4. (SBU) Upon arriving at Shadurdyev's office, A/DCM was surprised to see Garryev and his new assistant standing with the deputy governor and leaders of the welayat "public associations," including the Democratic Party, and the women's, youth, and veterans' associations. The septuagenarian Garryev, with whom the A/DCM had met several weeks earlier in Ashgabat, looked tired, and seemed less steady on his feet than in previous meetings.

Shadurdyev: Voter Questions Not Planted

¶5. (U) Shadurdyev briefly outlined Dashoguz' voting statistics: the welayat had 9 voting precincts and 271 voting districts which serviced the province's 550,000 voters. The series of campaign meetings which each of the six presidential candidates had held in Dashoguz had served to increase the world perspective of Dashoguz' citizens. Media coverage of the candidates' meetings had given Dashoguz citizens a basic familiarity with the platforms of all candidates. Participants in the meetings prepared their questions in advance, based on questions they had from what the candidates had said. It was notable that, even though the province was predominantly agricultural, Dashoguz' people had come to see that any future president had to be able to address a broad spectrum of issues, not just agriculture.

Luring Voters to Polls with Music and Dancing

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¶6. (U) Responding to a question about voter turnout, Garryev insisted that all voters would turn out. The February 11 election represented Turkmenistan's first step to democracy, and citizens wanted to participate. Further sweetening the pot, the government would declare a general holiday, and voters would be lured to polling places with live music and dancing. Asked about observers, Garryev said that there would be 12 from the OSCE and 2 UN observers. (Comment: Garryev's likely confused, the OSCE reps are in-country to assist the OSCE mission with reporting on the elections, they are not/not observing, which entails a wholly different set of procedures and reporting requirements, including starting observing during the nominating process. End Comment.)

Garryev: Let Voters Choose for Themselves

¶7. (U) Without prompting, Garryev stressed that the election would be "genuinely democratic": nobody would interfere with voters. Although there would be observers from public associations present at the polling place, they were operating under strict instructions not to instruct voters how to vote. The Central Election Commission had instructed that a special election reading room should be established in each voting district; these rooms contained information about voters' rights, voting procedures, and the candidates' backgrounds and platforms. This allowed voters to decide for themselves which candidate was best. Looking at the association leaders at the table, Garryev asked them whether they were telling members how to vote; all shook their heads. Garryev stressed that this practice was different from the "democracy" of Soviet days, when there was only one candidate and people were expected to vote for that individual even if they did not know him.

¶8. (U) Warming to this theme, Garryev stated that issues were being discussed to an unprecedented degree in this election. For the first time, voters were asking questions about matters that affected their lives: agricultural policy, medical care, education, living standards, division of land and foreign affairs were all issues under the public microscope. Likewise, voters were beginning to see

that it was not enough to vote for a local candidate just because he understood local concerns better than the other candidates; Turkmenistan's citizens for the first time were beginning to appreciate how many issues their future leader would have to be able to address.

Garryev: "Land Ownership" Not Private Ownership

¶9. (U) A/DCM noted that several candidates, including the interim president, had discussed the need for land ownership, and asked whether this meant that citizens would be allowed to own, buy and sell land. Garryev responded emphatically, saying that the land belonged to the state. While people could rent the land and even build houses, they would never be permitted to buy or sell the land. Indeed, if people wanted to own land, they could do so in the United States, he said.

Urging Open Justice for Zatoka

¶10. (SBU) At the end of the meeting, after Garryev and the others had left the room, the A/DCM told Shadurdyev that she wanted to raise USG concerns regarding the case of environmental activist Andrey Zatoka, who had first been imprisoned for creating a public disturbance, but subsequently been charged with a number of other, more serious charges, including possession of weapons and poisonous substances. The embassy wanted to bring to the attention of the Dashoguz provincial government that Zatoka's arrest had evoked an unprecedented international response. The eyes of the world were on Dashoguz, and the case was being seen as a barometer of how Turkmenistan's new government would respond to the rule of law. The United States hoped that the judicial process against Zatoka would be transparent, fair and open. Shadurdyev responded that laws were laws and must be followed, and asked whether the United States was trying to tell him that Zatoka was innocent. A/DCM replied that the

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United States had no way of knowing whether he was guilty or innocent of the charges against him. Instead, the United States was urging Turkmenistan to try Zatoka in a fair and open judicial process, and to give him full access to his attorney, as required by Turkmenistan's criminal code. Shadurdyev nodded, clearly getting the message. (Note: Several days later, a Dashoguz court sentenced Zatoka to a three-year suspended sentence. End Note.)

Education 101: Educating the Voters

¶11. (U) After the meeting, Garryev and Shadurdyev drove the A/DCM out to Kone Urgench Etrap (county) to visit a polling station and election education center. The two functions were together under the same roof of a district cultural center. In the first room -- obviously the education center -- Ruhnama materials had largely been replaced by stacks of newspapers, posters with pictures of the candidates and either their bio information or platforms, and tables with "volunteers." The volunteers were busy reviewing voter lists, which were based on residency records. Responding to a question from the A/DCM, they said that each voter must come in and show his national passport before getting a ballot. No voter would be able to cast more than one ballot, and no one could cast votes for others in his household. Another volunteer, tasked with asking information about voting procedures and voters' rights, was seated at a separate desk with a brochure containing the recently passed presidential election law, which Garryev proudly said had been sent to all polling stations by the Central Election Commission.

¶12. (U) In the next room were two clear plastic voting boxes: one very large and the other quite small. A district voting official sitting in the room, who would be tasked on election day with checking an individual's name off a voter list once he had seen the vote cast, said that the small box was to gather votes of pensioners or infirm citizens. The lists of individuals who would be visited by this traveling voting box were being compiled ahead of time by polling officials.

¶13. (U) Also in Kone Urgench are the ruins of the once-thriving capital of the Khorezm Empire that are now designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. Brutal attacks and massacres by Genghis Khan and Tamerlane left little intact of the ancient city, an important center of Islamic learning with more than a million inhabitants. The mausoleum of Najm-ed-din Kubra, a famous 12th century Khorezm Muslim teacher and poet who founded the Sufic Kobra order and was beheaded by the Mongols, and the 360 tombs surrounding the mausoleum are the town's holiest site. Every year thousands of devout Muslims make their way to the Kone Urgench complex -- and particularly the Najm-ed-din Kubra Mausoleum -- in search of miracles.

¶14. (U) Stressing the importance of seeing the Najm-ed-din Kubra Mausoleum to gaining a better understanding the faith of Turkmenistan's Muslims, Garryev insisted on accompanying the A/DCM and her translator to the mausoleum before departing Kone Urgench. Afterwards, Garryev walked through the grounds of the "360" with the A/DCM, telling her how much the experience meant to him personally and spiritually.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) With Turkmenistan's election soon to be under an international spotlight, voter turnout remains an issue of critical concern. It is important to the central government to demonstrate the "success" of its election with convincing participation rates, yet the turnout in the July 2006 gengesh (village council) and December 2006 district-level people's council elections were almost certainly substantially lower than the 90%-plus official figure. Clearly there remains a huge gap between these elections and OSCE-approved fair, open and democratic elections. Nevertheless, excitement over Turkmenistan's first-ever multi-party elections and the accompanying opportunity for change is palpable throughout the country. In addition to these pre-election visits, embassy

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personnel will be on the road on election day watching first-hand whether Turkmenistan's citizens will go to the polls to choose their new leader; their first chance to do so in 15 years. End Comment.

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